Van Horne Park Dedication
Rocky Hill, New Jersey

By: Philip A. Hayden
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Route 518—my "Main Street"—traces an ancient line.

It marks the seventeenth-century boundary between two vast and empty tracts allotted by the East Jersey Proprietors to Walter Benthall on the north and Peter Sonman on the South. In 1705, 3 centuries ago this year, a New York merchant named John Van Horne bought nearly 7,000 acres of Sonman's patent, stretching from the month of a small stream on the River Millstone, not far from the camps of a native American population, and running up the south side of Route 518 to the Province Line. The Western portion he shared with his brothers Abraham and Garret, and today it makes up the southwest quadrant of Montgomery Township. The Eastern portion Van Horne retained for his use alone. It would remain in his family for one hundred and thirty-two years.

When John Van Horne died in 1735 his part passed to his sons Abraham and James. James settled here—at least for a while—building the house that appears on the Dalley Map of 1745. By 1755, four rough plantations were in cultivation by tenants. The Van Horne brothers even tried hard to sell their property, but no one wanted it.

James bequeathed his portion to his sons James and John in 1761, and it is this John who settled in Rocky Hill permanently, on a roughly 1,200 acre parcel. When John Van Horne died in 1820, he left the farm to his widow Phoebe. She passed away in 1831, followed one year later by her son, Augustus. The land devolved to Van Horne's granddaughters, Susan R. Van Horne and Eliza Van Horne Ellis.

The 1,200 acres were partitioned between them into two large farms. One stretched west from Route 206, along the western trajectory of Route 518, and as far back as the Cherry Valley Road. The airport, the medical business park, and other structures cover it now. The other tract stretched

from Routes 206 and 518 to the Millstone River, then upstream almost as far as the Mercer-Somerset boundary. This is the land we stand on today.

So what remains of the Van Horne legacy? The stream through the land still carries their name.

The homestead survived for roughly 200 years. The mansion of its time, the house contained five bed chambers, two parlors, two store rooms, and a kitchen. Where it stood is less clear, but most evidence suggests it fronted Crescent Avenue.

It was the place Washington visited on regular occasions and the spot where he discovered John Van Horne chasing a pig around the muddy yard. It was the prison of the enslaved African named Prime, who, in pursuit of his own liberty, served in the Continental Army throughout the American Revolution, only to be taken by Van Horne and kept at Rocky Hill. And it was from this place that the same re-enslaved Prime petitioned for and won his ultimate freedom by act of the Legislature in 1786. It was the same homestead farm that as late as 1831, sweated and prospered through the labors of Bob, and Sucky, and Ceaser, and Dine, and Cate, and Betty, slaves all.

The house is gone today. It burned to the ground around 1935 while the Bergen family lived there. The former Hercules Power plant sits on top of it. But vestiges of the tract still abound. Drive up Route 518, or down Route 206, or along Cherry Valley Road and you'll find yourself navigating its ancient lines. Drive past the Merritt House, the Scasarra House, The Shaefer Home or the Greiff Residence, and you'll pass the larger farms that later made up the place.

Thirty years ago, development plans threatened these fine open fields—the result of zoning and designs destined to level all sense of local community—and this caught the ire of at least some people I know. A gigantic housing development posed the most serious challenge, with a threat so great, and a scheme so void of forethought or vision, that it electrified many and led to Rocky Hill's listing on the National and State Register's of Historic Places. The town's first Historic Preservation Ordinance—the teeth behind an otherwise toothless honor—followed shortly thereafter. Thanks to the Schaefers, the property ultimately came into public hands.

And it is in this spirit of preservation and community that we assemble today to honor the past with a new kind of trust: For what are we all if not stewards of the land? What legacy do we leave if not something greater than the legacy we inherit? And how can we do our part to reconcile the present debate over land: that is, individual rights versus the common welfare? In sharing the job among neighbors we build a sense of community, and in holding this land we proclaim its worth.

Sources:

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